BY GERALD POSNER

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VW Day

Sometimes buying a car means burying the past.

Why would any Jew buy a BMW, Mercedes or Volkswagen? It was my mantra, repeated frequently to friends, especially those with Jewish surnames and a German car. Before anybody could answer, I'd cite the wartime slave labor used by all three firms and the fact that their factories fueled the Nazi effort. My worst vitriol was reserved for lowly Volkswagen. The "people's car" was conceived by Hitler, who reportedly helped with the original design.

Even after the war, there were links with unsavory characters. Adolf Eichmann was a foreman at an Argentine Mercedes factory until the Israelis tracked him down in 1960. Franz Stangl, the Treblinka death-camp commandant, worked for Volkswagen in Brazil before he was found in 1967.

I am 44 years-old and only half-Jewish. No family members died in the Holocaust. My heartfelt objections are purely emotional — not necessarily reasonable — and grew from my research for two books about the Third Reich and war criminals. My anger was deep-set, and while I realized the new generation bore no guilt for its parents' crimes, I did not want my hard-earned money going to companies that were even tangentially connected to the Nazi war effort.

My wife, Trisha, an English Jew, encouraged my sentiments. Yet most disagreed. My Jewish father thought my position too extreme. Friends pointed out that the Israelis used Mercedes army trucks. I was not impressed. An English Jew who was a ranking officer of BMW asked, "Would you buy an Italian car?" Yes. "What about clothes from Spain?" Yes. "Well then, your objection to buying German cars is strictly based on time. A succession of Roman emperors tried to wipe out every Jew in the empire, and the Spanish had the Inquisition. Your objection to Germany is because it was so recent." He was right, but if I were to boycott all countries that had at some point institutionalized anti-Semitism and sanctioned killing Jews, there would be few things to buy. Reason be damned, it was Germany that had earned my wrath.

Then a strange thing happened. Last spring, while strolling in Washington, I passed a car with which I was immediately enamored — Volkswagen's New Beetle. Trisha was with me and shared my enthusiasm for the startling design. We actually began debating whether we might one day want one. It was the first crack in my "boycott German cars" veneer. I started visiting dozens of New Beetle Web sites and read magazines that gave it kudos. But buying one was no easy step. We were proud not to have owned a car during 20 years in New York. And we asked all the practical questions: Do we need the extra responsibility for only a few trips out of the city? What about upkeep? A fortune for insurance? And, of course, the fundamental obstacle — it was German.

In July, while in Florida, we passed a VW dealership and stopped to examine some New Beetles. The salesman showed us a black one. "Too Nazi-like," remarked Trisha. I agreed, mentioning that a couple of Gestapo agents would fit in perfectly. The salesman left us alone.

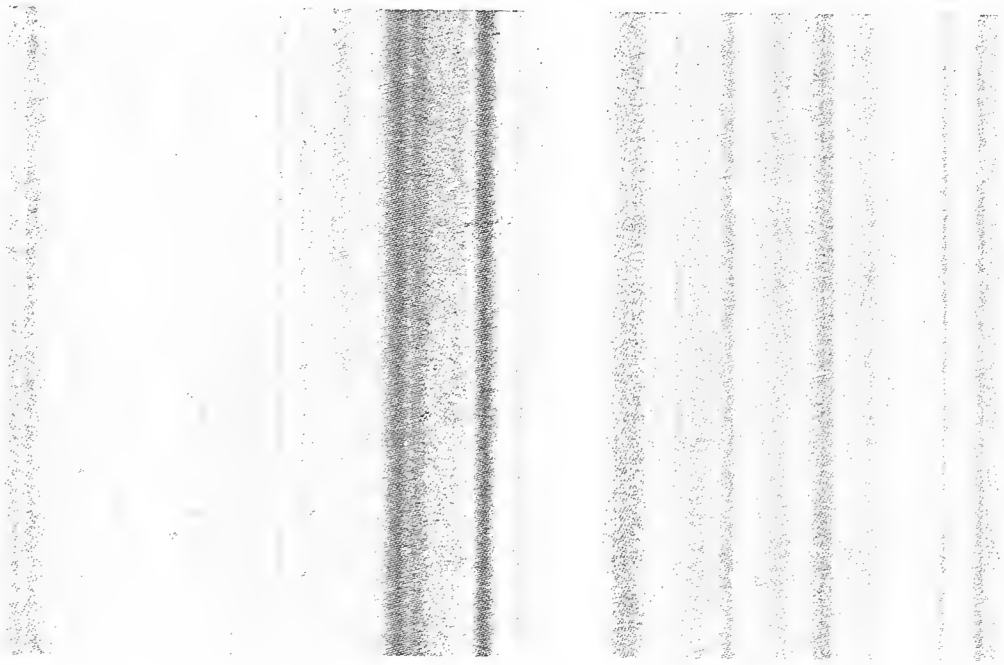
Trisha and I flip-flopped frequently. Yes, it was a great car, and it was time to bury the past. No, we didn't need it, and would probably be happier in 20 years if we put $20,000 into a mutual fund. Maybe the long waiting lists were a sign the car was not for us. The desire for one might just be a midlife crisis, and if we were patient, it would pass.

I told some friends of my unexpected Beetle obsession. "Didn't you feel like scratching a Mercedes after you saw 'Schindler's List,'?" one asked. "What about VW's failure to pay war reparations?" asked another. The reparations obstacle seemed resolved when Volkswagen abruptly reversed itself in early July and announced it would finally establish a fund to compensate wartime slave laborers. The angst returned when Holocaust survivors filed two class-action lawsuits contending VW's offer was inadequate.

In late summer, a dealer in upstate New York called. The car I wanted — in silver — would soon arrive. The next day we saw "Saving Private Ryan" and watched uncomfortably as German troops mowed down hundreds of G.I.'s on the beaches of Normandy. We almost canceled the order.

The car arrived just before Labor Day. It is thoroughly captivating. And whenever I have second thoughts about driving a German car, I calm myself with the reminder that Mexican workers south of the border manufacture the New Beetle.

When Trisha telephoned her 85-year-old mother in London, a conservative Jew, and told her we bad bought the Beetle, the answer was quick: "Congratulations, darling. Maybe the war is finally over." ■

Gerald Posner is the author, most recently, of "Killing the Dream," an investigation into the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

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